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Pakistan-India Feuds Upset U.S. Strategy

Washington's Balancing Act Threatened

By Richard M. Weintraub
Washington Post Foreign Service

ISLAMABAD, Pakistan, Nov. 5 —As it moves to reassert a U.S. role in South Asian regional politics, the Reagan administration suddenly is finding the effort complicated by new recriminations between Pakistan and India over U.S. military and nuclear policy in the region.

In a careful balancing act, the administration is trying to widen its relations with India while maintaining the United States' close strategic ties to its neighbor and bitter rival, Pakistan.

But no sooner had Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger completed what is viewed in New Delhi as a generally successful visit there last month than he came to Pakistan and started talking about supplying this country with U.S. early warning radar aircraft—a theme that has set political alarm bells ringing here and in the Indian capital.

A further round of fingerpointing began with a report in yesterday's Washington Post about Pakistan's nuclear program.

India and Pakistan are accusing each other of playing dangerous political games, and language difficulties are sharpening the problem.

While administration officials have spoken only about the possibility of supplying an airborne early warning system to Pakistan, this suggestion quickly was translated into a much more solid proposal in the often imprecise press of the two capitals.

After the Post cited U.S. intelligence reports as saying Pakistan had enriched uranium to 90 percent—a critical step in building a nuclear bomb—Indian nuclear officials quickly warned that India, too, could and would enrich uranium for weapons.

While admitting today that the reports could cause problems when

Pakistan's new \$4 billion aid package comes before Congress, Pakistani officials wondered aloud why India was not being held to the same standards when they publicly threaten to use a capability Pakistan does not even admit having.

In this region, the language of weaponry is often imprecise.

Following press reports earlier this year that the United States might funnel advanced Stinger anti-aircraft missiles through Pakistan to Afghan rebels, people here began speaking of almost any shoulder-fired anti-aircraft weapons as "Stingers." Now, any airborne early warning system has come to be called "AWACS."

In the case of early warning systems, the general terminology is potentially confusing because it fails to distinguish between top-of-the-line and less sophisticated systems and the different threats they would pose to India.

U.S. diplomats in New Delhi have scrambled to allay Indian fears that any deal on an early warning capability for Pakistan has been struck. They also have pointed out that no decision has been made on any type of system, much less the state-of-the-art AWACS. Nevertheless, India's ambassador to Washington has warned that a sale could jeopardize newly warming ties between the United States and India.

In Islamabad, President Mohammed Zia ul-Haq, sensing domestic and international implications in a U.S. operational role in Pakistan, quickly called in reporters to tell them that he is interested in an early warning capability. But he categorically denied that Pakistan would offer a base on its soil to any other country and clarified that AWACS planes would be manned by Pakistani personnel, according to the newspaper Dawn.

Pakistani officials also moved quickly today to deflect the nuclear issue.

"This isn't the first time these

reports have come to our attention. The U.S. comes to us at least once a year with anxious inquiries based on some intelligence report or another," said a highly placed Pakistani official. "I am sure the U.S. government has waited and watched and found the reports invalid."

"It is a constant struggle to make sure relations between the two countries are not undercut by reports of a questionable nature. Now the U.S. government has a problem [when it has to go before Congress]. The government of Pakistan is well aware of U.S. law. Any violation will lead to discontinuation of the aid relationship and Pakistan is doing nothing that will jeopardize that relationship."

With the United States embarked on a new long-range policy, underscored by Weinberger's recent visit, to reestablish a closer relationship with India, such visible reminders of U.S. ties to Pakistan as the early warning system or a planned naval visit to Karachi underscore the difficulty of the task. A naval task force, led by the nuclear carrier Enterprise, was scheduled to arrive in Karachi Thursday, but the visit was postponed at the last minute because of rioting there.

The Reagan administration's balancing act in South Asia is complicated by the legal requirement that the United States not give aid to countries possessing or developing a nuclear weapons capability.

The United States has an important stake in strategic cooperation with Pakistan, partly because of this country's role as a base for U.S. policy in Afghanistan, and partly because of Pakistani links with the Middle East. As a result, Washington is now Pakistan's major arms supplier, providing it with some of the most sophisticated weapons in the U.S. arsenal.

At the same time, the United States also has recognized that it has left an open field for the Soviet Union in India, Pakistan's neighbor, its foe in four wars and builder of the world's fourth largest military machine.

U.S. planners who look beyond images of poverty and backwardness see an Indian military that is effectively trained, equipped with increasingly modern weaponry and determined to be self-reliant.

While New Delhi still buys modern weapons from the Soviet Union and the West, it has embarked on a program of developing its own tanks, ships, missiles and aircraft. The United States sees India's desire to build its own sophisticated military hardware as a vehicle for expanding American influence as a counter to the Soviets'.

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The U.S. argument is simple: over time, if there is no counterweight, a predominant Soviet influence could develop in India even though Indian planners want to maintain a neutral stance in world politics.

It is primarily the United States that can supply the super-computers, the advanced avionics, the graphite composites for airframes, the missile-tracking equipment and the other high-technology items the Indians eagerly seek.

The problem, according to observers of the situation, is that short-range strategists, especially at the Pentagon, sometimes do not mesh closer and longer-range goals, leaving a policy that ends up arguing with itself.

This, they say, is what seems to have happened with the Weinberger visit to India and Pakistan.

In New Delhi, by all accounts, Weinberger had good sessions with Indian officials, clearing away some mutual misconceptions. Indian officials described what they wanted and, while the U.S. side made it clear that not all the Indian requests could be met, there was ample negotiating room.

Within hours of his arrival in Pakistan, Weinberger was speaking publicly about a possible offer of early warning systems. They would fill what he and other Pentagon officials say is a clear need to counter Soviet and Afghan government pressures on Pakistan from across the Afghan border.

Indian military planners see it another way.

Writing in a major Indian daily newspaper, Air Commodore Jasjit Singh, deputy director of India's Institute for Strategic Studies, has argued that Pakistani targets are so close to the Afghan border, and the terrain so mountainous there, that no early warning system is likely to help meet the threat from Afghanistan. Indian defenses,

on the other hand, would be severely compromised, Singh wrote.

This region is the meeting point for the Middle East and Asia, and is a little bit of both, a problem with which policymakers have wrestled long before Washington started trying its hand. To try to isolate policy issues of the Middle East from those of Asia, or vice-versa, can be a difficult, if not impossible, task.

"Regardless of the professed justifications, the real effective role of the AWACS [U.S. or Pakistani] in Pakistan would be directed against Indian and Soviet airspace," Singh added, noting that "during peacetime, AWACS in Pakistan would be able to monitor the flight profile of virtually every single aircraft of the Indian Air Force since the range covers almost the entire spectrum of IAF deployments."

"This would help build up a complete picture of the flying effort, training patterns and operational tactics of the Indian Air Force within a short span of time unless a major redeployment deep inside Indian territory is arranged in time," Singh wrote.

During wartime, observers point out, the capabilities of the airborne early warning radar systems would multiply the effect of Pakistan's much smaller air force against India—a fact that also has not been lost on Indian planners.

With Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev scheduled to visit India this month, U.S. officials here now can only hunker down in anticipation of an expected flood of Moscow-related activity and then prepare for congressional questions about the nuclear programs of both Pakistan and India, hoping that in the interim they can continue their balancing act.